

## —TESTAVILLE, OHIO

*by M. Alan Ford*

Roland gave two dollars and thirty-eight cents to the gas station attendant, who then asked where Roland was heading. “Testaville,” Roland said.

The attendant seemed unable to decide between a laugh and a frown. “Testaville? Lots of weird people in Testaville. We get truck drivers all the time who don’t want to go in, and they’re happy when they get out.”

Roland smiled. “I know. I grew up there.”

“Never been there myself. How long you been gone?”

“Five years.”

“Well, maybe it’s worn off by now.”

Roland didn’t laugh. He looked the attendant over quickly before pulling out onto the highway. The attendant was young, in his mid-twenties, about the same age as Roland. His shirt was cleanly pressed, his hat spotless and sharp, his attitude relaxed and easy to talk with. This was different from what Roland was used to, and he wasn’t thinking of the big city.

He turned on the radio and listened to music for a while, though this far out, reception was intermittent and static-filled. He was not paying attention, in any case. It was background noise, something to distract him from the way his hands tightly gripped the steering wheel. Traffic was sparse. He nearly missed the exit, which was nothing more than a small lane abruptly branching off from the highway. He followed it around in a loop that plunged behind a hill and under the highway, and found himself on the familiar two lane road rolling in lazy twists and turns through low hills and stands of trees.

He found the spot he had come to know as “the border” and pulled off to the shoulder. There was nothing special about the border. No boundary markings, no billboard, no “Welcome to Testaville” sign. It was simply an ordinary pattern of trees and hillsides he had come to recognize. He left the motor running. He got out and walked a few feet up the shoulder and stood for a moment looking at the road twisting off into the hills. Then he turned back.

He reached in through the open door, turned off the engine and removed the key, and went to the back of the car. He looked up and down the empty road, then opened the trunk. Inside was a large suitcase along with all the other things usually found in a car trunk. Spare tire, jack, socket wrench, a few tools, can of oil, spare gallon of gas. He pushed the suitcase aside and pulled back the blanket behind it.

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Hidden under the blanket was a small trinket box made of pale blond wood darkened by age. It was unlocked but held closed by a brass latch, and the lid was painted with the image of a winged woman in a robe setting foot on the prow of a boat, as if descending from the sky only a moment before. He tipped the box back and forth. Inside, something rolled about.

He covered it with the blanket again and pushed the suitcase up against it. Then he got back in the car and started the engine. He did not return to the road immediately, but only after a pause to take a deep breath, and then he moved the car at such a slow pace that a sauntering man could easily have walked past it.

The pattern of hills and trees slid by like a scrolling painted panorama. The border, as best he could judge it, came abreast of the car. Then it was behind him. Then he felt it, that first stab of unease. It came like a hand gripping his heart, a sudden pressure in the chest and a flush of heat to his face, and his fingernails dug painfully into the steering wheel while his breath caught in his throat. He nearly turned the car around. Instead, he came to a stop again and breathed shallowly until the fear subsided, never completely, but to a point where he could continue on despite himself.

It stayed with him when the road straightened as it came out from the hills and he saw Testaville just ahead. It was a small town, only about ten thousand people, one of many that had sprung up in the building boom just after the war. He drove past house after house, in tract after tract, looking at the neat small lots, each with a stretch of lawn and a driveway. At one point he passed a gas station. The attendant, staring at the sky as he leaned against one of the pumps, wore a dirty shirt pulled half out of his belt, and his hat was held twisted in his tight fists.

Roland found his own house among the others. He slowed as if to stop, then sped up and drove on past. He went around the block twice. Then he turned onto the main street and drove to the park. It was just as he remembered it, a field of grass and trees one block square, with benches and picnic tables, and a small playground with swings and a jungle gym about which children clambered. He parked, stepped to the sidewalk, and stared into the park for a long time.

A woman wearing a pink dress with a matching pillbox hat passed in front of him. She stumbled and fell. Roland helped her up. "Are you all right?"

She dusted off her dress. The heels of her hands were scraped where she had broken her fall. "I'm fine, sure." She gave him a faint smile. "Just accident prone, I guess."

Roland said nothing. The woman walked off. He crossed the street to a store where he pulled a soft drink from the refrigerated section. His hands shook so badly that they rattled the bottles.

*So soon?* he thought. *It can't be happening so soon.*

Keeping his hand steady, he took the bottle to the counter where a young girl, about sixteen years old, was arguing with the store manager.

"But I didn't touch it!" she said.

"This isn't the first time, Shelly. There was a twenty in here."

Roland looked at the cash register. The drawer was open, and a few ones, fives, and tens were neatly stacked in their respective bins, but the next bin was empty.

"I don't know!" she said. "The door was open. Someone must have come in."